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Writing Sound, Hearing Race, Singing Time: Richard Powers's *The Time of Our Singing*

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ABSTRACT

This essay addresses forms of time and temporalizations used in Richard Powers's *The Time of Our Singing*. The novel depicts the fictional story of the mixed-race family Daley-Strom. While *The Time of Our Singing* embeds its characters in historical events that pertain to the history of "race" and racism in the United States, it underscores that being-in-one's-time and being-in-time are at odds with each other. While the history of "race" is seemingly unchanging and repetitive, an ontology of time, understood as a dynamic exchange between the past, present, and future, can give rise to a vision in which "race" loses its interpretative grip on history. This essay shows how *The Time of Our Singing* establishes an aural semiotic model in which the murderous, cruel, and exploitative history of "race" can make itself heard, without canceling out voices that stand in for solidarity and hope for those that are racialized.

KEYWORDS

History of race; time and temporalization; aural semiotic model of time; Richard Powers's *The Time of Our Singing*

At the opening sentence, Richard Powers plunges the reader into a crucial moment in his novel *The Time of Our Singing*: "In some empty hall, my brother is still singing," recounts the narrator, "[h]is voice hasn't dampened yet. Not altogether. The rooms still hold an impression, their walls dimpled with his sound, awaiting some future phonograph capable of replaying them" (3). By using a present continuous verb form to describe the action and the temporal adverb "still," this description reveals a particular understanding of time, in which the past coexists with the present, indicating that the act of singing is continuing while the narrator, the brother of the singer, records the lines quoted above. In most cases, we understand time as spatialized, and as a continuously unfolding line beginning in the past that then moves through the present into the future. The opening to *The Time of Our Singing* runs counterintuitive to this, with past and present operating contemporaneously. The singing, an action in the past, is described as still being audible in the present: its acoustic sound waves can still reverberate from the walls. It is entirely possible that this sound could be recorded with the proper instruments. This raises several questions as to the kind of temporal understanding developed in the novel, its source, and its causes and effects. Is it possible for literature to be a kind of futuristic machine capable of "writing sound," capable of acting as a "phonograph," and, if so, will it also be capable of recording "*The Time of Our Singing*"?

Richard Powers, whom Judith Flanders once called "The greatest author you have never heard of," is nowadays a critically acclaimed author. He has won numerous literary prizes, among others the 2006 National Book Award for Fiction for *The Echo Maker*. While Powers is often mentioned in the same breath as "Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis, Joseph McElroy, or Don DeLillo," there has been no massive academic response to his work, possibly because "the author's erudition forces his readers" (Ickstadt 23). Powers conceives of the novel as a "supreme connection machine" (Williams 104), and, by way of his characters, he frequently ventures into the terrain of the natural sciences. In his novels, he covers, next to historical events and music, subject matters such as contemporary

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genetics, computer science, artificial intelligence, and neurology, all of which provide narrative content and form (see Burn and Dempsey; Dewey; Kley and Kucharzewski; Heil). Critics have pointed out that in *The Time of Our Singing*, baroque musical structure plays an important role for connecting different topics to each other (Ickstadt; Kozyrakis; Petermann). Less attention, however, has been paid to the topic of time in the novel, and its forms of temporalizations. This essay brings to the fore that *The Time of Our Singing* performs a notion of time inspired by Bergson and Einstein and explores its thematic and structural consequences. It establishes an aural semiotic model to evoke an idea of time in which its different temporal layers coexist, without canceling each other out. It shows that hearing and singing, echoes and reverberations are crucial metaphors for understanding the notion of nonlinear time brought forward in the novel—an idea of time that is played out against the naturalizations of "race" in history as established in the fictive story of the mixed-race family Daley-Strom. These protagonists cannot unfold their outstanding musical talents because they are confronted again and again with unequal, cruel, and supremacist notions of "race."

This essay explores how the novel establishes a "temporal and aesthetic zone" (English 362) where the past, present, and future times of the various members of the mixed-race Strom family interweave with recorded events in U.S. history. In doing so, the novel remembers not only events primarily belonging to a history of "race" and racism in the United States, but also the social movements and actors that tried and try to counter the devastating effects of racism. Most importantly, the novel illustrates how a lived, experienced time—or duration, following Henri Bergson's idea of time (*Evolution*; *Matter and Memory*; *L'énergie spirituelle*; *Time and Free Will*; *Duration and Simultaneity*)—constantly alters the meaning of both historical and personal events. By performing a notion of duration, the novel shows how being-in-time and being-of-one's-time can diverge from one another. In short, the novel makes a distinction between a lived, experienced duration and perceivable recorded historical events. Performing different modes of time is one of the most noticeable ways that the novel disrupts essentializing understandings of "race."

The following example helps us to understand these different "forms of time." The characters David Strom and Delia Daley first meet and fall in love with each other in *The Time of Our Singing*, during a concert of the internationally renowned contralto singer Mariah Anderson. A black artist, Anderson performed this famous and influential concert at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington in 1939 (Freedman). In this moment, the participation of the story's fictional characters becomes grounded within historical events already transmitted through historiography. However, during the concert, David and Delia also "travel" into their own "future," establishing the plot's multiple timelines. As the story develops, David and Delia's miraculous "time-travel" tale transmutes into a founding myth of the Strom family. This moment is referred to throughout the novel, although remembered differently by the various family members.

What does this example illustrate? First, how events proliferate—taking place in a single location, while simultaneously situated in different times (the time of the concert and the "future" time of David and Delia where the concert is history). Second, that these locatable but temporally diverging events also take on different "forms of time." These "forms of time" are represented as historically transmitted and datable events, such as the Mariah Anderson concert. They are represented as experienced duration, as in the description given about David and Delia's time travel and in David and Delia's extemporized narrations of their untimely experiences—experiences that will come to have an impact on various characters who later hear their story. These different "forms of time" branch out, intersect, or run parallel to one another, presenting multiple interpretations and possible answers to one recurring crucial question in the novel: will the color line be overcome in some reachable future? The novel's enabling performance concerns time and, with it, questions of memory, anticipation, and change, while challenging the persistence of the notion of "race." Powers's choice of words, the characters' focalizations, the multiple perspectives on a singular event, and the general structure of the novel combine to enable *The Time of Our Singing* to use different temporalizations to tell a story of a mixed-race family in the United States. From the starting point of miscegenation and by giving mixed-race protagonists a voice, the novel disturbs a

racialized theory of history based on dermatological evidentialisms (see Bhabha, Fanon, and Nyong'o). Tavia Nyong'o, Homi K. Bhabha, and Frantz Fanon's interventions into conceptualizations of "race," together with the "forms of time" used in the novel, reveal how *The Time of Our Singing* is able to evoke the wish in the reader for a possible "future," where unjust and unequal social relations based on "race" are forced to be critically examined, although not necessarily surmounted, using the trope of "racial hybridity."

By problematizing a notion of "race," through literature, the novel intentionally performs W. E. B. Du Bois' famous statement: "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line" (Du Bois, *Soul of Black Folks* n.p.). The characters in the novel are an important vehicle to gain understanding into how the notion of "race" shapes and inhibits personal development and cultural achievement over time and space. In *The Time of Our Singing*, the most important characters are members of the extended family Daley-Strom. Delia Daley is the daughter of the highly educated and financially successful doctor William Daley and his wife, Nettie Ellen, an energetic woman who invisibly pulls the strings and manages William's business. Delia has two brothers and two sisters, Charles, Michael, Lucille, and Lorene, whose children also surface in the storyline. David Strom is a talented physicist from Strasbourg who immigrates to the United States to escape the Nazis' extermination politics. Delia's family is black. Despite having both black and white ancestry, her maternal and paternal ancestors are mostly descendants of African slaves; it is the American "one drop rule" that determines their "race." David's family is white and Jewish. His family, persecuted by the Nazis, shared the fate of five million other European Jews and perished in a Nazi extermination camp, their precise fate unknown. Delia and David marry in 1940, and later in the story they have three children, Jonah Strom (1941), Joseph (Joey) Strom (1942), and Ruth Strom (1945). Ruth Strom marries Robert Rider and has two children with him, Kwame and Robert (also called Ode). As the story progresses, each character is forced to cope with racializations and notions of racial belonging that impact their actions, choices, and decisions. Each member of the family is very talented, either as a musician or in the natural sciences, but none, including Delia Daley, are able to profit from their talents without experiencing loss, humiliation, and rejection, occurrences that impede their access to adequate musical training or their ability to build a career. Inspired by a moment when they get a glimpse of a possible future uninhibited by notions of "race," Delia and David consciously choose to build a family together as a deliberate act to counter the color line. Unfortunately, their conviction that they can move "beyond color" in educating their children is initially unfruitful. Any attempt to define oneself and others independently of notions of "race" and "racial belonging" seems doomed to failure. In some cases, attempts fail because racializations hold people of color back, while securing white privilege and social advantage through terrorizing notions of "white supremacy." In other cases, attempting "to go beyond color" is seen as betrayal, an act of disloyalty, or the denial of solidarity with those oppressed by racisms. *The Time of Our Singing* stages different notions of "race" that are rooted in the history of black and white "race" relations in the United States.

The background information provided by historical data are important because this grounds the portrayal and discussion about "race" and "racial belonging" in the novel. David and Delia's decision to disregard the color line will be met with suspicion and distrust by other characters. These critical voices are reasonable when considered against the historical background of "race" relations in the United States, allowing readers familiar with this history to empathize with the reservations they express. Any sexual relations across the color line, as Tavia Nyong'o reminds us, is a reminder of

> [a] history utterly commingled with the history of Africans in America, one that structured the slave relations from its very beginning, one that shaped the subsequent, torturous logic of Jim Crow, one that underpins the vexed and enduring dynamics of color consciousness within the black population. (5)

In *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory*, Nyong'o is careful to avoid argumentation that reduces "racial hybridity" to a "depoliticizing catchall" (5) that promises redemption from a heritage of slavery. In his view, the traumas of the past should not be turned into a biopolitical question where "racial hybridity" is presented as the remedy for "centuries of racial

domination in the US" (5). Despite this, he also points out that "the mongrel past" might be "a historical alternative to overly burdened racial identities bequeathed us by slavery, segregation, and ghettoization" (7). "Racial hybridity" helps to envision a different past and a different future, and, as such, it can "leverage a critique of the present" (7). It exposes the historicity of the concept of "race" and troubles its underlying teleological temporality. For Nyong'o, "race" is not only a historical theory, but "a theory of history" whose "assumptions regarding time and temporality" must be laid bare (11). This means that he refuses to see "race" as an ontological marker but rather as an epistemological tool that relies on ontology to eternalize itself in dermatological evidentialisms.

A recurring theme in *The Time of Our Singing* is the question of whether singular actions and events can reverberate with, and change, a societal structure over the course of time, despite occurring at random and seemingly chaotic instants. This is a question that becomes pressingly urgent when it comes to the notion of "race." The novel illustrates how racializations are a means of inclusion and exclusion, exploitation, control of resources, and white privilege. The conceptual category of "race" appears to remain unchanged despite the determining descriptors of "race" lacking any scientific verifiability. As such, "race" represents a static version of history, where the distribution of wealth, resources, and access to societal privileges stay the same. Time and history represent two different forces in the novel, which become more apparent through an investigation into the novel's development of different characters that aim to overcome "race as a theory of history" (Nyong'o, passim).

The story of William and Delia Daley in *The Time of Our Singing* powerfully demonstrates how the notion of "race" inhibits personal advancement and growth and the ways in which it is highly unjust and unfair. But it also shows how it nourishes hate and humiliation, can lead to arson and murder, and can elicit the brutality of government agencies. The story portrays this government brutality in the political suppression of the Black Panther movement, linking this history to David and Delia's daughter Ruth. However, Delia's character and story are the focus of the novel. As one of the main narrative voices in the novel, her fate is decisive in directing the development of the plot. The fact that Delia dies suddenly after a furnace explodes leads family members to come to different interpretations as to the cause; was it an accident or arson, was she a victim of circumstance, or was her death a racially motivated murder? The question will put the family Daley-Strom in jeopardy.

Along with David, Delia is also both a narrator and participant in the "time travel" moment during Mariah Anderson's concert. Through her voice and actions, the reader comes to learn more about this experience, what it felt like, and the changes that it led to. Delia is instrumental, both as focal point and as a focalizer, in determining how the notion of "race" and its effects are depicted in the novel.

A crucial aspect of Delia's character is that she is an outstanding singer. Her father, William, tells her that she "sounds like the angels raised from the dead, if they still bothered with the likes of us down here. A sound like that could fix the broken world" (Powers 2003, 36). When Delia first meets David, he asks if she is a professional singer (220). Jonah, her firstborn son, describes her voice as the "[s]un coming up on a field of lavender" (295). Despite her outstanding talent, Delia is refused entrance into the Philadelphia Conservatory when the vocal faculty learn that she is black. They reject her application, safeguarding their white privilege and leaving her without hope to "be schooled at the upper level of her skills, let alone the lower reaches of her dreams" (88). This experience of shattered hopes and dreams is something that that Delia tacitly shares with her father, William Daley, a man of outstanding achievements. William Daley trained as a doctor of medicine at Howard University and is a certified member of the universities Talented Tenth (75). As the plot develops, we learn that he, like Delia, has experienced racial hatred and racialized humiliations; however, their personal experiences of racism do not lead them to the same conclusions. One evening, shortly the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, they get into an argument about strategies and tactics against racism that tears them apart.

The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is the genesis of the argument between William, Delia, and David. William and Delia both know that David played a role in the making of the atomic

bomb. On several occasions, David disclosed to them the secret behind his travels to Oak Ridge and his participation in the Manhattan Project. In the novel David worked on the question of neutron absorption and "problems surrounding the implosion" (415). William believes that the second blast, the bombing of Nagasaki, is racially motivated. He writes his son-in-law with a request for an explanation:

> Would this country [the United States] have been willing to drop this bomb on Germany, on the country of your beloved Bach and Beethoven? Would we have used it to annihilate a European capital? Or was this mass civilian death meant, from the beginning, to be used only against the darker races? … I had in mind a different victor, a different peace, one that would put an end to supremacy forever. We were fighting against fascism, genocide, all the evils of power. Now we've leveled two cities of bewildered brown civilians … You may not understand my racializing these blasts. Maybe you'd have to spend a month in my clinic or a year in the neighborhoods near mine to know what I wanted this war to defeat. (416)

William's point of view resonates with historical sources and research into the opinions of Afro-Americans about the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Boyer; Jerome and Taylor; Kearney). As Paul S. Boyer has pointed out, blacks had their "suspicion that the bomb had been deliberately reserved for use against Asians rather than Europeans" (Boyer 199). According to Boyer, the *Washington Afro-American* newspaper wrote on August 18, 1945 that the Hiroshima news

> 'revived the feeling in some quarters that maybe the Allies are fighting a racial war after all.' The editorial suggested that American military planners may have spared the Germans, who, 'after all, represent the white race,' and 'saved our most devastating weapon for the hated yellow men of the Pacific. (199)

This fictional episode in *The Time of Our Singing establishes* itself as "historiographic metafiction" (see Hutcheon), creating space to establish a counter-archive recording Afro-American thoughts and opinions. The argument between William, Delia, and David reveals what is at stake and replays various strategies dealing with racism and the question of "race." In the novel, the historical division between Afro-American and Jewish communities in the United States, at its height in the 1960s when conflicts arose over universities, labor–management relations, housing, welfare systems, and schools (Harris and Swanson), is also used to provide metafictional historiographical hints for the reader. David's German-Jewish roots and the persecution and extinction of his Jewish family importantly influence how he responds to William's point of view, a response that he later relates to his son Joseph shortly before dying (Powers 463–70). However, William's stance toward the atomic bomb is shown to be justifiably critical, a military action whose necessity is questionable and has never been historically proven, as the H-Net-debate surrounding Gar Alperovitz's *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb* shows (see http://www.doug-long.com/debate.htm). William also suffered a personal loss to U.S. involvement in the Second World War. In the novel, one of William's sons is drafted into the U.S. army, suffers under racist military structures, and dies a soldier. But William's standpoint also reflects the debate about the ethical necessity of U.S. military involvement and the suspicions commonly held among Afro-Americans during the Second World War. For many Afro-Americans, whether soldiers or civilians, the war was being waged on two fronts, a "double V campaign," of fighting against fascism in military actions abroad and against "racial" injustice and inequality at home (Cooper). Within its fictional setting, the unfolding of the novel's plot also resonates with historiographically recounted developments.

Before discussing the philosophical implications of the argument between Delia and William, it is useful to briefly summarize the plot development and how Delia and William's viewpoints are described.

William tells his daughter and son-in-law that he wants to discuss with them whether the atomic bombings reinforce white supremacy and arranges a visit when he is in New York to attend a medical conference. When William arrives at Delia's, it is clear that something upsetting has happened to him. Delia senses that he is seething inside, embittered by a feeling that he cannot ignore. It is a feeling that she recognizes from their past encounters, when he has been confronted with the effects of racial discrimination:

> She feels him struggle, with the last scrap of dignity so powerful in him, to bite down his rage and swallow it whole, a cyanide capsule they give to agents caught behind enemy lines. She knows he won't be able to. He'll wrestle and fail, no less spectacularly than the world has failed him. (Powers 417)

As William's story unfolds, she comes to learn that he was refused entrance to the conference despite being registered to attend. To add to this injustice, he was held by hotel security and later escorted out of the hotel by several police. As the plot unfolds, William's only resort to counter these humiliations is to fall back on identity:

> His eyes test the extremes of punishment not yet visited on him. Stripped so easily, he knows no bottom. Held and humiliated for an hour: it cost him nothing. Laughable. Dust yourself off and walk away. But if that, why not locked up in the coat check, chained to the shoe-shine stand in Penn Station, kept illiterate, driven out of the polling place, beaten up for turning down the wrong alley, or hung from a ready sumac? Even the most stubborn self in time will be identified. (412)

Confronted with the knowledge that every black man might encounter this fate—and, in other ways, every black woman, every gender or sexual dissident, every person of color—William embraces his "race." In doing so, he rejects his daughter's past, present, and future choices: to marry a white man, to love and sing classical music, and, most of all, to try to raise their children "beyond race" (424). For William, there is no "beyond race," except for those who do not see the effects of color and benefit from this—for those who cling to the privileges of white supremacy. He believes that Delia's wish to raise her children "beyond race" is a gesture of non-solidarity with those oppressed by racism. For him, "beyond race" is synonymous with "beyond me" (426). The division on this question of "race" is insurmountable, and he leaves them that evening never to see them again.

But are his accusations founded? Does her character become "color-blind" after marrying a white man? Does she deny solidarity with those oppressed by racism? The development of Delia's character in the narrative and the events she encounters suggest that she has not disengaged herself from the question of "race." The history of slavery is not somehow redeemed through the promise of mixed race. Rather, mixed race is a reminder that "race" itself is a construct, that there is no clear line separating one "race" from another. In this context, Delia's character is more likely to be a target for racial hatred than to be a vehicle for a progressive shift of the color line:

> Some girlish, unenslaved part of her imagined their marriage [David and hers] might cure the world. Instead, it compounds the crime by assaulting all injured parties. … Now even her simplest needs become unmeetable. She'd like to walk down the street with her husband without having to play his hired help. … She'd like to sling her baby [e.g. Jonah, the first-born] on her shoulder, take him shopping, and for once not bring the store to a standstill. She'd like to come home without venom all over her. It will not happen in her life-time. But it must happen in her son's. (329)

It is her love for children that leads Delia to insist on a vision that looks "beyond race." Their future should and must look different. When she met David for the very first time, she caught a glimpse of this possible "future." After Delia's argument with her father she rejects his point of view that she must make her children conscious about the effects of racism and decides that:

> She won't surrender anything. She'll give them warmth, welcome, riffing, the congregation joy of call and response, a dip in that river, deep enough to sport in all their lives. She must give them the riches that are theirs by birth. *Negro. American.* Of course they must know the long, deadly way those terms have come. But she refuses to give them self by negation. Not the old defeating message that they've already been decided. All she can give them is choice. Free as anyone, free to own, to attach themselves to any tune that catches their inner ear. (479)

For William Daley, "race," as a marker of identity, brings with it a source of belonging that he can rely on, as a signifier with the potential to enable solidarity of the oppressed. In contrast, Delia sees "race" is a prescriptive marker that dictates and determines which "songs" her children will have access to. She is determined not to anticipate the restrictions of "race." Instead, she wants to give them "choice" with the hope that time will offer them a better future that they might jump into with both feet. In the plot development, Delia's most crucial actions and choices replay the question

whether time can overcome a history where "race," as a source of belonging and solidarity, or of denial and hatred, becomes a permanent marker of a racialized identity. Delia's point of view is a source of betrayal for her father:

> [T]o think that recognizing means more than its opposite. To think that race is still in motion. That we stand for nothing but what our children might do. That time makes us someone else, a little more free.
>
> Time, she finds, does nothing of the kind. Time always loses out to history. Every wound ever suffered has only lain covered, festering. (329)

Sometimes, in the deep of the night, Delia does think that "time loses out to history" (329); nevertheless, she and David firmly believe that there might be a new choice "beyond race" that their family will invent. It is useful to look at how the argument between Delia and William Daley is portrayed in more detail, in particular to the degree it resonates with the discussions and propositions put forward by black scholars such as Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, and Tavia Nyong'o. These scholars have all contributed to exposing the specific time and temporality of "race," by which it becomes a "theory of history" (Nyong'o).

Nyong'o's proposal to regard "racial hybridity" as an enabling tool for unsettling notions of "race" is particularly important to determine the stakes involved in cases where a long-established debate among people of color is personified in literature. By positing "race" as a theory of history, Nyong'o implicitly and explicitly relies on postcolonial thinking and its critique of Western historiography. Important to his argumentation is Homi K. Bhabha's differentiation between "pedagogic" and "performative" time. In a discussion of *The Time of Our Singing*, it is important to understand how narratives of "racial hybridity" are able to unhinge the notion of teleologically unfolding linear historical time, a notion of time in which human progress is homonymous with racial progress. Through Bhabha's rereading of Frantz Fanon's essay "The Fact of Blackness," originally published as a chapter in the latter's *Black Skin, White Masks*, we are able to better understand his postcolonial criticism of Western historiography. Fanon opens "The Fact of Blackness" with the "corporeal malediction" (111), "'Dirty Nigger!' Or simply 'Look, a Negro!'" (109). For Fanon, this "malediction" is a "historico-racial schema" imposed on the "black man" by "the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories" (111). He argues that this "historico-racial schema" (111) makes any ontology of the black man impossible, since being black never stands for itself but is always already part of a relation bounded by the role it plays for the "white man" (110). In his text, Fanon performs the impossibility of identifying the black man with humanist and enlightenment ideals, "to be a man among other men," "to come lithe and young into the world that was ours and to help build it together" (112–13). He lays bare the way in which the world of the white man overtly or implicitly negates the possibility to identify the black man with ideas of continuity, rationality, and progress and engenders the black man's despair, frustration, anger, and reflexive pride.

In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha shows how "pedagogic" and "performative" time in Fanon's essay rub against each other and cancel each other out. In Bhabha's view, Fanon speaks from the "time-lag of cultural difference" (340) and refuses to assume a predetermined position where the black man is relegated to "occupy the past of which the white man is the future" (341). Fanon's refusal to accept his place as the white man's belated other, in Bhabha's reading, constitutes a temporal caesura that opens up an "enunciative space" (339). This "enunciative space" (339) helps us to grasp the disjunctive temporalities of modernity, while it renders perceptible the active struggle of a postcolonial subject to "make a name for [him or her]self" (Derrida 174, qtd. in Bhabha 347).

For Bhabha it is clear that this "name-making" entails the claim to a radical singularity, a positionality that is in solidarity with the oppressed. When Fanon writes that the "Negro experience is not a whole, for there is not merely one Negro, there are Negroes" (Fanon 136), he is not performing "a postmodern celebration of pluralistic identities" (Bhabha 341). Rather, he "proclaims the oneness of the suffering and the revolt" (342). This performance goes against the "pedagogical

time" of modern nationalism and its formulaic insistence to make "out of many one." Where nationalism's "pedagogical time" makes one out of many, "performative time" acknowledges "the people as many." In "performative time," subjects of enunciation emerge to "demonstrate the prodigious, living principles of the people as contemporaneity" (208). Therefore, the divergent double-time of modernity incorporates the "signs of a coherent national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing number of national subjects" (209). "Performative time" is thus the effect of a narrative's performativity, of narrative's ability to make subject positions available in the narrative process. "Performative time" embodies a refusal to lump people together into a single whole and stresses the urge for connectivity and solidarity.

It is precisely the subaltern's textual, cultural, structural refusal that is taken up by Nyongo; the idea that the subaltern's creation of a caesura makes the peculiar double-time of modernity visible and enables an enunciative space. In Nyong'o's reading of Bhabha, "performative time" destroys the reproducibility of "docile, useful bodies" (Nyong'o 12). This is because "performative time" enacts a moment that is disjunctive to the nation's interpellation of a people as one, an interpellation that takes place in a "homogeneous, empty time" (12). A "disruptive immediacy" emerges in "performative time" that cannot be lived in the "antechambers of history" (12). As a sign, "racial hybridity" unsettles narratives of a racialized progress, of a homogeneously developing racialized history, and so destroys "the ability of race to narrativize time" (12). "Racial hybridity" unhinges the underlying temporality of "race" in which it acts as a theory of history. The need for "racial hybridity" to "make a name" requires that it invest focus in finding a story to accompany its unsettling factuality.

And how does this relate to *The Time of Our Singing*? Bhabha suggests that "performative time" creates a rupture in the empty, continuous time of modernity and that this rupture opens an enunciative space where "the people as many," those who are in need of connecting in solidarity with each other, are able to emerge. Nyong'o connects the enabling disruption of "performative time" to the possibilities of "racial hybridity" but warns his readers against uncritically accepting a notion of "reproductive futurity." In Nyong'o's view, "love, romance and reproduction" (171) are not innocent ways to achieve a just and equal post-racial society. Indeed, in the United States these notions have resulted in the "one drop rule" based on an understanding of "hypodescent" and are historically proven to have preserved racial hierarchies. To see heterosexual reproductive relations as already achieving a post-race society means to yoke heterosexuality "to a vision of politics in which the summum bonum is indefinitely deferred through the figure of the child" (163). Nyong'o points out that any vision that ties racial justice to heterosexual and reproductive "racial mixing" limits "the range of what the future, and by extension, politics, may be allowed to mean" (171). Most importantly, he stresses that by turning toward a perpetually deferred futurity of post-race generation yet to come, the future is severed from the past and the ineffable history of slavery is too easily abandoned.

In *The Time of Our Singing*, the argument between Delia and William Daley illustrates for the reader Nyong'o's critical viewpoint on "reproductive futurity," achieved by "love, romance and reproduction" (171). Delia's wish for a just future for her children where they are able to choose who they are is countered by William's insistence that they be introduced to and educated about "history" (Powers 419). But William's demand, delivered with a "whip crack of his voice" (419), rests on a notion of "race" situated not only in the historical, but is precisely a "theory of history" as described by Nyong'o. Later in his discussion with his son Joseph, William allied himself with the idea of "hypodescent" (563), translating a social history of "race" into an immutable category. He does this because of his need to identify with his "race," and this is fulfilled only if he accepts a definition based on essentializing notions passed down through history. Identifying "race" reifies it as a descriptive category even when the aim of talking about "race," in the context of the United States, is to make visible slavery's cruel and unimaginable exploitation of human beings and its historical continuities in, for example, racial segregation, racial inequality, and racist murder and lynching. As Kwame Anthony Appiah has argued, to refer to "race" always means "to identify the things to which it applies, the things we refer to when we speak of 'races'" (Appiah 33). To escape

essentialist notions of race, Appiah suggests introducing the term "racial identity," taking into account the fact that "individual identities are complex and multifarious" (134). His theory strengthens a notion put forward by William Du Bois regarding the "badge of color." Du Bois describes this badge as "relatively unimportant save as a badge" and argues that the real significance is grounded on its ability to ally itself to a "social heritage of slavery" (Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn* 116). To wear the badge of color means to identify the continuity of racial thinking and racisms, while adopting it in order to do the necessary work of "disidentification" (Muñoz) with essentialist notions of "race." William Daley falls into the trap of essentializing "race." Identified, stigmatized, and humiliated as whites' fantasized "other," his only escape is to resort to a definition of self that is proud of being identified with the category of blackness, while excluding other (strategic, ironic, distant, humorous) possibilities of identification. By essentializing "race" and his rigid dismissal of his daughter's choices, William indeed "go[es] imperial" (Appiah 84). Appiah describes "going imperial" as essentializing racial notions of collective identities that suppress "the possibility of identification with others," identifications that individuals might also "share with people outside their race or ethnicity" as part of their collective identities (134). It is only much later that William comes to realize he was mistaken about not acknowledging an inclusive dimension in his understanding of blackness. He tells Joseph his version of the argument with Delia and David:

> 'Your parents thought they saw some way out of the rule. The rule of the past.' He stares out onto the spring lawn, trying to picture what they saw. 'They wanted a place with as many categories as there were cases. But they still had to bring you up here.' His voice was desperate, racing the clock. 'They wanted a place where everyone was his own tone.' He shook his head. 'But that's blackness. There is no shade that it doesn't already contain. You weren't any more double than any of us. Your mother should have known that.' (Powers 562)

Here blackness transcends skin color and moves toward the notion of solidarity proposed by Bhabha, specifically "the oneness of the suffering and the revolt" (Bhabha 342). It acknowledges the singularities of protagonists who are parts of a composition through which a social notion of blackness comes into being. William reaches the conclusion that "we're supposed to take everybody in. All the rest. … Everyone. All the half-castes and quarter-castes and one-thirty-second castes. We should have made room for you" (Powers 563). All shades are welcome to "become black" and to join a struggle that aims to overcome racism. The description of William's "whip crack of voice" (419) not only recalls the whipping of slaves as a form of torture under slavery but also alludes to the opening up of space, as small as a crack in a wall, that comes into existence when it separates itself from the whip. His voice may have betrayed his anger in his argument with his daughter, but this alternative interpretation highlights what bell hooks refers to as the "space in the margin"—"that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we meet in solidarity to erase the category colonized/colonizer" (hooks 152). The "whip crack of his voice" (Powers 419) transforms into an enabling space where inclusion is possible and where there is room for everyone of every possible imaginable shade providing they oppose the motivations behind the crack of the whip. As such, this opening up of space is both a reminder of slavery and a contemporary space for solidarity. It is arguably the same space that Du Bois describes when talking about the source of his solidarity with Africa. In his view, slavery is a "heritage [that] binds together not simply the children of Africa, but extends through yellow Asia and into the South Seas" (Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn* 117). William outlives his daughter by many years, and although he is "racing the clock" (Powers 562), he recognizes his daughter's ideas in this inclusive, nonessential notion of blackness and is still able to pass on his message to her children.

Reducing Delia's choices and actions to a naïve belief in a "reproductive futurity" would be unjust. Crucially, the novel describes how she must live with the (often unpleasant) consequences of marrying a white man. Delia's choices for her life are limited by the effects of racializations, and marrying a white man does not end this. She is blocked from achieving her personal ambitions as a singer, and even after marrying she struggles to find a livable place for herself, her white Jewish husband, and their mixed-race children. Delia's voice gives this struggle a

personal voice aligning the readers with her viewpoint and provides us with an intimate exploration of the interrelations between race, gender, and sexuality. In *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America*, author Ladelle McWhorter shows how race and sexuality operate neither merely as analogous, nor as mutually influential modes of self-articulation that allow for forms of societal oppression and exclusion along a normalcy/deviance axis. Rather, race and sexuality "are mutually codependent and mutually determinative" (McWhorter 14) forms of biopower in a Foucauldian sense. But this does not mean that the category of "race" is conflated into the category of "sexuality." By employing Foucauldian theory McWhorter shows that: "[m]odern racism is about racial purification; it defines the abnormalities it identifies as racial impurities or as threats to racial purity. Modern racism is not really about nonwhites; modern racism is really all about white people" (35). Racial thinking provides the means through which "[e]xclusion, oppression, hatred and fear of abnormality" (35) are practiced and perpetuated in society, according to McWhorter. However, one important way to achieve "racial purity" is through the control and disciplining of sexuality. The impact of myths around the black man as "sexual predator," "hypersexual," or a "black rapist" and the black woman as seductress," or the white woman as "pure and virginal" and the white man as "controlled, ordering and morally impeccable," should be analyzed through a Foucauldian lens. McWhorter argues that these stereotypes incorporate terrorizing notions of white supremacy and the biopolitics of state powers that safeguard social injustices by means of governmental, social scientific and legal measures, and medical management. She concludes that it is imperative to refuse "to do the work of self- (and other-) policing in the name of the normal" (326). To be able "to perceive any aspect of the power networks that shape our lives other than the narrow face they present to our own group" (327), she sees it as necessary to "stop compartmentalizing oppression on the basis of sociological identity" (327). For McWhorter, to take a stand against biopolitical control and exclusion one must:

> [take] up the challenge of inventing what to do in the absence of set models and clear precedents and of living with the uncertainties and unforeseeable consequences that invention entails. … doing … is not a guarantee that we shall overcome – or that we shall overcome as agents and conduits in an order we want to resist and dismantle. But it is the only open door, the only possibility. Go forth and do likewise—which means: Listen. Speak. Incite. Invent. And never, ever adjust. (331)

McWhorter's challenge resonates well with Delia's agenda and is reflected in both her actions, perceptions, and descriptions and those of other characters and narrators. Delia's character "take[s] up the challenge of inventing" despite the unforeseeable outcomes. Constant modulation is a leitmotif for Delia, "distant keys always falling back to *do*" (Powers 331). "Do," however, can indicate the tonic pitch of a scale that calls for harmonic resonance and resolution in music written in a major key, but it also hints at the infinitive of the verb "to do," stressing that things will come into existence only when we work to make them happen. The double-meaning of "falling back to *do*" (331) links back to my suggestion that the novel employs an aural semiotic model of time and memory that destabilizes "race as theory of history" (Nyong'o). This aural notion of time represented by the phrase "distant keys falling back to *do*" (Powers 331) illustrates how time is like a "polytonal cluster" (93) relating disparate sound-events to each other, even if the "melodies" that are formed in that process undergo constant modulations, refer to "distant keys" (331), or follow their own "intervals, rhythms, durations" (411). This musical understanding of time is a recurring theme in the novel. For example, at one point in the novel Delia relates David's description of his work methodology and idea of time to his colleague, who is astonished at his ability to solve the strangest physical riddles:

> 'You must learn to listen,' he says. If particles, forces, and fields obey the curve that binds the flow of numbers, then they must sound like harmonies in time. 'You think with your eyes; this is your problem. No one can see four independent variables mapping out a surface in five or more dimensions. But the tuned ear can hear chords.'

> Delia, though, believes him, and she knows how it is. Her husband hears his way forward. Melodies, intervals, rhythms, durations: the music of the spheres. Others bring him their deadlocks—particles spinning backward, phantom apparitions in two places at once, gravities collapsing on themselves. Even as they describe the hopeless mysteries, her David hears the rich counterpoint coded in the composer's score (411).

At another moment, David suggests that "'[t]ime must be like chords. Not even a series of chords. An enormous polytonal cluster that has the whole horizontal tune stacked up inside it'" (93). Through these descriptions it is possible to better understand how sound is an enabling semiotic model for understanding a notion of time informed by the insights of relativity theory. Following Pierre Truchot's suggestions in "Une approche bergsonienne de la spatialité en musique," I argue that this is the case: since music is composed out of different and heterogeneous components, human perception does not need to unite it into a specific mental representation. An aural semiotic model of nonlinear, inter-subjective, and over-personal processes of time and memory also unhinges them from their common representation as subjective, personal, and psychological. In the novel's context, this applies to the question of how to deal with injustice, inequality, and exclusion brought about by "race," and there are a number of reasons why this changed understanding of time and memory is important. It mirrors the novel's use of narrative, figurative, and rhetorical devices to establish precisely this shifted understanding of time and memory. But it also connects to the question of "race" insofar as David and Delia hope to shift its meanings by "inventing" a "fifth choice" for their mixed-race children, beyond David's problem-solving analogy: "They can be A and not B. They can be B and not A. They can be A and B. Or they can be neither A nor B" (Powers 287). This invention of a fifth choice is called into being by "doing": "Their tune together in constant modulation, distant keys falling back to *do*" (331). What "race" could mean if there was a "fifth choice" available in the future, is constant modulation, by living it differently, minute by minute, day by day, year by year, as recalled in David and Delia's vision:

> The future that has led them here. The one they make possible. … They can map it slowly, their best-case future. Month by month, child by child. Their sons will be the first ones. Children of the coming age. Charter citizens of the postrace place, both races, no races, *race* itself: blending unblended, like notes stacked up in a chord. (345)

The "choices" that David and Delia want to make available for their children are not a denial of "race," as William understood, but "[b]lending unblending, like notes stacked up in a chord" (345), suggesting that "race" should be heard, not seen. To lend one's voice to "race" means to be able to "blend" with other voices, and to enter into a song in which no voice is blended out. A solidarity in singularity, a song to be sung.

In *The Time of Our Singing* a parallelism is established between time and music. Time and music coexist as a multiplicity of different sounds/events that can also be integrated into an overall structure. This underlying notion of temporality complements Bhabha's proposition of a "performative time" since in performative time, the "people as many" are given multiple subject positions. This multitude of people can come into being through the performativity of narratives that call different subject positions into being. In *The Time of Our Singing*, it is through the different characters and their development that multiple standpoints, resolutions, and conclusions on and about the question of "race" become available to the reader. This ruptures the homogeneous, empty time of modernity with its implicit racializations. Modernity's racialized double time, where national culture becomes represented as a dichotomy between white people (signifying continuity, rationality, progress, that is, modernity) and black people (excluded from the assumed teleological unfolding of time, and thereby opposed to modernity) is opposed through the novel's narrative. However, "the performative inhabitation of the nation by a black dignity thriving outside the confines of its dialectical resolution" (Nyong'o 103) is best illustrated by David and Delia's journey through time.

David and Delia's time travel is narrated, remembered, and referred to at various moments in the novel. First, from Delia's perspective, who recalls it as she tells her parents that she has fallen in love with a white man (Powers 220–26). Then when David recalls the incident as he and his daughter

participate in the famous historical March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in "August 1963" (269–79). Later, Delia again recounts the experience in "Thee," the final chapter of *The Time of Our Singing* (627–31). The chapter title "Thee" refers to Mariah Anderson's opening song "America" at her Lincoln Memorial concert in 1939, in which she changed the lyrics from "I" to "we":

> My country, 'tis of thee,
>
> Sweet land of liberty,
>
> To thee we sing;
>
> Land where my fathers died,
>
> Land of the Pilgrim's pride,
>
> From every mountain-side
>
> Let Freedom ring! (Freedman 68)

In this chapter, shortly after she has an epiphany about the doing of "race" that needs undoing, Delia "has this sound everywhere in her. Now it's right in her range: *my country, thee, thee*" (630). Claiming the land where her foremothers and forefathers died and directing herself toward an other, Delia suddenly recognizes the boy responsible for bringing her and David together. As recounted in previous chapters referring to their time travel, David and Delia stumble on a boy at the concert who is lost. He suddenly takes an interest in David, the white foreigner with the strange accent enjoying their conversation about astrophysics and being able to talk about time travel, gravity's bending of space, and the speed of light. But in contrast to previous accounts of the story, in this version "the gravity of the impossible" (225) of a relationship across the color line has suddenly changed. In previous versions, Delia insisted that a meeting between a black woman and a white man was simply not possible, and she could not meet the German again. However, in "Thee" (627–31), "she hears the man answer, not with impossibles, but with the same suspended maybe with which he listened to the impossible contralto" (629). This "suspended maybe" causes her to suddenly realize that "there is nothing but standing change. Music knows that, every time out. Every time you lift your voice to sing" (629). Even musical notation only comes to life with a voice that lends itself to its interpretation. Each piece of music written for the voice needs to be sung to come into being. Beyond the formal characteristics of musical notation lies the uncapturable "grain of the voice" (Barthes 179–90) and its unpredictable, unintelligible, and mysterious effect on the listener. However, this uncapturable aspect of the voice can be realized only when the listener is attentive to, for example, an "impossible contralto" (Powers 629). In the narrative, this "impossible contralto" (629) is Delia. As she sings sotto voce to herself, David, a white man, listens and, inspired, he starts a conversation "beyond the color" with her, a conversation that can take place only in a "suspended maybe" (629). This place of "suspended maybe" is reachable only by time travel. In a conversation with her mother, Delia recalls how she found this place during Anderson's concert:

> Yet in the last night's rareness, the press of that record-setting crowd, up too close to history, something had turned in her. Some ancient law had split apart. Drunk on the godlike Miss Anderson, the voice of the century, a feather floating on a column of air, Delia made a separate journey, traveled down into the briefest crack in the side of sound. A widening in the day had opened up in front of her, pulling her and her German stranger into it. They'd traveled together down into long time, along a hall without dimension, to a place so far off, it couldn't even really be called the future, yet. … She had traveled nowhere. And yet, the man had traveled to that nowhere with her. (135)

The place that David and Delia visit is utopia, the land of nowhere and a place that does not exist on any map of the Earth. Their utopia is reachable through "a brief crack in the side of sound" (135), by listening attentively to "the very tones that constitute 'unspeakability'" (Morris 372), by waiting patiently for a singular interpretation of an all-too-known score. Creating time by singing it into existence demands more than paying attention to the "affective tonalities" passed down through

history. It also important to be attentive toward possible futures that press upon the present moment, possible futures that shape the present as well as the past. What makes *The Time of Our Singing* strong is the suggestion not only that it is possible to reach this future but that it is actually already here, located in cosmic space-time, reverberating not only in the present moment, but with the present choices we undertake. Delia understands this mutual interdependence between present and future, illustrated through her epiphany that time, like music, is "nothing but standing change" (Powers 629). Past, present, and future are constantly (inter-)changing, and although time is nothing but "standing change," it is a change that nevertheless has to be translated into practice through decisions and actions with unknown and unknowable outcomes in the future. Delia decides to trust David and work toward a future in which her grandson Ode will sit on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and enjoy a conversation about astrophysics and the secrets of time. He will rap himself into existence by suggesting that it is not racial mixing but inventiveness that makes the seemingly impossible possible. The answer to the unanswerable question of where the bird and the fish, who have fallen in love, are going to build their nest is provided by invention, which brings into being what does not yet exist. "The bird and the fish can make a bish. The fish and the bird can make a fird" (631), raps Ode, and suddenly David understands that "the bird can make a nest on the water" (631), and Delia sees that "the fish can fly" (631). In making "impossible" choices David and Delia hope to be able to produce a different echo of the "impossible" in the present, an echo where the prefix "im-" has lost to time. The development of the plot and the novel's narrative "solutions" to questions of "race" should be taken seriously. Temporalizations are not only an important means for capturing the doings of race, but also provide propositions for undoing "race as a theory of history" (Nyong'o). As Nyong'o has argued, through the signs of its own multitudinous multiplicities (race, sexuality, gender, class, differently abled), it is possible to disturb the dichotomizing double-time of modernity that excludes black dignity. This idea of multitudinous multiplicities is made graspable through the voices and positions of the differently racialized characters that interact with each other throughout the narrative. The description of the game "crazed quotations" that the family Daley-Strom often play together is demonstrative. In the novel, the game functions as a *pars pro toto* for the performance of a multiplicity of interacting voices that perform different standpoints on the question of "race." "Crazed quotations" is a competition: one competitor picks a tune to sing, while someone else has to beat the clock to find a countersubject before the singer reaches the double bar (see Powers 13). David takes the game and its "long conversation of pitches in time" (13) as a model for his understanding of time:

> Our father knew more than any living person about the secret of time, except how to live in it. His time did not travel; it was a block of persisting nows. To him, the thousand years of Western music might as well have been written that morning. Mama shared the belief; maybe it was why they'd ended up together. Our parents' Crazed Quotations game played on the notion that every moment's tune had all history's music box for its counterpoint. (58)

The idea is that any tune can fit together with another song, as long as it is modified to attune itself to another and an other's song. This interaction between different tunes is possible as long as "all history's music box" (58) can play the counterpart, regardless where it comes from and when it was composed. Every song sung has a countersubject, providing a voice is lifted to enter into a polyphony in which no song cancels the other out. "Every stacked sound stayed whole in the changing chord" (611). In music different voices can interact with each other in a way that they can follow their own harmonies, rhythms, and durations.

Considering music as a suitable semiotic model to capture the doings and undoings of time infers that music has the capacity to do far more than render different sounds simultaneously and in relation to each other in an unfolding whole. In music traces of past sounds may be retained and future sounds anticipated, producing echoes and repercussions in a given, present chord, and, as the crazed quotations game illustrates, these echoes and reverberations can be pulled from "all history's music box" (58). This aural semiotic model proposed in *The Time of Our Singing*

allows reconciliation between different philosophical propositions that deal with the notion of "race." The works of theorists such as Du Bois, Fanon, Bhabha, and Nyong'o argue that it is important to preserve the history of "race" and its origins in slavery, as well as its (historical) continuities in racial oppression and exclusion, in racist murders and lynching. However, the notion of "race" is problematic. "Race" needs a referent to which it applies and therefore risks reifying the very racist notions that so urgently need to be overcome (see Appiah). Through a perception of time that permits a polyphony of voices to compose it, where past, present, and future are seen as a dynamic interplay, makes it possible to integrate these different positions. Time is like chords, suggests David, like an "'enormous polytonal cluster that has the whole horizontal tune stacked up inside it'" (Powers 93). The vision presented in the novel is one where it is possible to commemorate an ineffable history of slavery, to perceive historical and contemporary racisms, and to outline a feasible utopia at the same time. When we determine to create a future that is informed by a dream for a better society, the impossible will echo differently in the present. For this reason, it is necessary to remember the past, to attune oneself in the best way possible to the songs that compose one's life, while setting sail for an unknown country called utopia, by way of "the briefest crack in the side of sound" (135). When one engages with memories, histories, imaginations, and inventions, endlessly, in unchanging change, this crack opens up in the interaction between past, present, and future.

Notes on Contributor

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